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The Gospel and the Creed

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*The*  
*Gospel and the Creed*

BY

THOMAS B. STRONG

BISHOP OF RIPON

READ AT THE ANGLO-CATHOLIC CONGRESS

20 JUNE, 1922

HUMPHREY MILFORD

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

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## THE GOSPEL AND THE CREED

‘THE Purpose and Aim of this Congress is’, according to the statement on the front page of its programme, ‘to extend the Knowledge of Catholic Faith and practice at home and abroad, and, by this means, to bring men and women to a true realization of our Lord Jesus Christ, as their personal Saviour and King.’ The ultimate purpose here stated is one with which every Christian man must have sympathy : and it appeals with special force to members of the Church of England, as it combines in its purview the evangelical message of Salvation through Christ and the reference to Catholic faith and practice. I do not think, therefore, that I need, in any way, to apologize for my presence here to-day ; though I am, of course, aware that some, perhaps many, of those here present may support beliefs and practices which do not seem to me to be either rightly described as Catholic, or capable, intrinsically, of valid defence. I could not, for instance, accept many of the statements in the Handbook, under the heading ‘misunderstood subjects’. I do hold, and in this I understand that we here—I think it will become increasingly manifest throughout Christendom—are all likely to be agreed, that the Gospel of Jesus Christ as the Saviour of man, which is the divine answer to the doubts and hopes of man, will make firm and stable progress when it is presented by a society ‘perfected together in the same mind and in the same judgement’, ‘speaking the same thing’. The Gospel makes its appeal as a faith, not only as a life ; and either without the other, though it may perform part of the work laid by Christ upon His followers, must

always fall short of what Christ's Church may rightly be expected to do.

Our subject to-day is the Gospel and the Creed, and I am glad to have the opportunity of addressing some remarks to you on this head, for it is one upon which there is much discussion. Many questions are involved, and I cannot treat them all. Two of the most important, the idea of the Supernatural and the doctrine of our Lord's Person, are in the very able hands of Mr. Selwyn and Mr. Mozley; I shall not touch upon either of these subjects. I wish to say a few words upon a matter which seems to me of vital importance at the present time—the function of a definite faith, expressible in definite terms, in the shape of a creed, in the proclamation of the Gospel of Christ.

There has been, as we all know, a prevalent notion that Christianity needs no positive doctrine—no dogma. Its functions are fulfilled if men are virtuous and charitable, and when that is so, it does not matter much what they believe. I greatly hope that this theory of religion is gradually dying of inanition. Christianity has always been, when it is at its best, a missionary religion: it is hard to imagine a more futile programme for missionary work than a Gospel, so-called, without a creed. It is merely homiletic when it ought to inspire with new force and enthusiasm: and it leaves all the real problems of nature and life and religion out of account. The hope of Reunion, which has been seriously delayed by the prevalence of such notions as these, will probably extinguish them finally, now that the task of finding an agreed basis has been at last taken up with determination and goodwill.

I do not propose, therefore, to trouble you with arguments in favour of the profession by a missionary body of a definite form of belief. The point to which it seems to me more immediately necessary to direct our attention is one which comes to us from the side of



historical criticism. What we are now told is, in effect, that the Creeds themselves as we have them are a spurious accretion to the original content of the Christian faith, to be accounted for by the influence of non-Christian influences acting upon the minds of those who preached the Gospel first, and then more extensively upon the growing Catholic Church. Two conspicuous cases of this external influence are said to be Greek philosophy and the mystery-religions. Of these, the second concerns more directly the sacraments and the doctrine connected with them; I am, for the present, more particularly considering the Creeds, and I have therefore to deal primarily with the influence of Greek philosophical thought.

In order to deal with this subject as clearly as I can in the brief time possible now, I will ask you to consider for a few moments one of our present Creeds somewhat carefully. I do not choose the *Quicumque vult*, partly because this document does not cover the whole ground of the Creed—it says nothing of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit—partly because it differs in history, and style, and usage from the other two. I select rather the Nicene Creed so-called, because that is used both by the Eastern and Western Churches, and because, from the present point of view, anything that may be said of it is true *a fortiori* of the Apostles' Creed.

If then, we turn to the Nicene Creed, we find that it falls into three paragraphs. The first deals very shortly with the doctrine of the Father, and affirms the creation of the world by Him. Strictly speaking, this is or involves a metaphysical doctrine: no one, for instance, who held a purely materialistic view of the world could accept this article of the Creed. But the appearance of the word Father removes even this article from the region of pure metaphysic, and connects it with the teaching of our Lord. In the second paragraph we have the doctrine of the Son, and of His manifestation

in the Incarnation, and of His Second Coming. In the third paragraph there is a brief statement of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit: and there is added a reference to the Church, to Baptism, and to the Christian hope after death.

It is of the utmost importance to notice that in all this there is only one word which travels definitely outside the vocabulary of Scripture, and that is *ὁμοούσιον*. It is true, of course, that those who drew up the Creed, and those who have defended it since, use of necessity the language of philosophy, because all theological belief involves—as I have just pointed out—a scheme of thought which affects and is affected by other ideas and convictions. But it is noticeable that these philosophical arguments are not included in the Creed. There is not even an indication of the meaning of *οὐσία* implied in the word *ὁμοούσιον*. This is a point of some importance, and, in order to illustrate it, I will ask your attention for a few moments to certain passages from St. Athanasius. As you are aware, he was not a member of the Council of Nicaea, being in deacon's orders only; but he was in attendance upon the Patriarch of Alexandria, and being already a theologian of high eminence, was consulted informally on the questions in dispute. About the year 352 he wrote a book, *De Decretis Nicaenae Synodi*. This was intended to defend the Council against criticism based on its use of the expressions *ὁμοούσιον* and *ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ πατρὸς*. In chapter 1 he tells us that persons have asked the question, 'Why did those who met at Nicaea use unscriptural phrases (*ἀγράφους λέξεις*) *ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας* and *ὁμοούσιον*?' He discusses at considerable length the actual problem before the Council, and gives his answer to the above question as follows (ch. 20): 'The Bishops . . . were compelled to collect again the sense out of the Scriptures, and to state again more clearly what they said before, and to write that the Son was of one substance with the Father.' 'If then (ch. 21)

[the Arians] refuse the terms on the pretence that they are strange, let them reflect upon the sense in which the Council used them, anathematizing what the Council anathematized, and then, if they can, let them find fault with the phraseology. . . . If they blame the sense, it is plain to all that they are talking idly about the wording, and using them as a starting-point for their impiety. . . . Let any studious person perceive that, even if the phrases are not in so many words in the Scriptures, yet they carry the sense of the Scriptures, and by giving expression to this they declare it to those whose hearing is sound towards piety.' Athanasius then considers various erroneous inferences which may be drawn from the term *οὐσία*, and from the use of such phrases as Father to describe God: then he writes (c. 22), 'Even though it be impossible to comprehend what the substance (*οὐσία*) of God may be, yet if we perceive that God is, and if Scripture describes Him in these terms, we merely wish to describe none other than Himself when we speak of God as Father and Lord. . . . So let no one feel startled, if he hears that the Son of God is of the essence of God, but rather admit that the Fathers, clearing up the sense, wrote more plainly but, as it were, in equivalent phrases, "from God", and "from the Substance of God".' They thought that it meant exactly the same to say that the Son was *ἐκ τοῦ Θεοῦ*, and that He was *ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ Θεοῦ*. The former phrase runs back upon John xvi. 28: the meaning of the other is determined by the first. In another place in the same book (ch. 31) Athanasius lays emphasis upon the superiority of Scriptural phraseology over that of 'the Greeks'. 'We can indicate the [nature of] God better and more truly by means of the Son and by calling Him Father than by naming Him by means of His works alone, and calling Him Ingenerate. The latter points to the works created by Him by means of the Word: the name of Father calls attention to the unique generation from His

substance. And as the Word is superior to created things, so and more truly will it be better to speak of God as Father than as Ingenerate. The latter word is unscriptural and suspect, and has many meanings: the former is simple and scriptural and truer, and points only to the Son. The term Ingenerate was devised by Greeks who know not the Son: the term Father was recognized by our Lord (ἐγνώσθη παρὰ) and has been given [to us] as a gift (κεχάρισται).'

It is plain from these passages, and many others could be quoted from the *De Decretis* and other works, that Athanasius conceives the function of the Council to be to interpret and to protect the Scripture, to prevent its teaching being gradually changed by the intrusion of alien and incompatible ideas. The meaning of the Scripture is the main test of what is true, and it is supported, so he would contend, by the utterances of distinguished theologians in the past (*De Decr.* 25, foll.). It is not, I think, possible to maintain that Athanasius was trying to translate Christian doctrine into philosophical language: he is guided throughout by Scripture, and he brings all the phraseology to that test. We should not always, perhaps should not often, accept his interpretation of the text, especially in the Old Testament, but I think it is impossible to avoid the impression that his object is interpretation and not speculation.

The evidence of Athanasius shows, I think, what the Church had in view in its use of the word *ὁμοούσιον*. As I have already observed the rest of the Creed is entirely within the language of Holy Scripture. It describes in its second paragraph the salient facts in the Life of our Lord—His Resurrection and Ascension; and in this it simply summarizes the account of Him which stands in the New Testament. It is of great importance to note that all these statements are historical in character: they affirm the occurrence of certain

events, and perhaps it is not too much to say that, if they are true, the account of our Lord in the earlier part of the second paragraph is natural enough. It is at this point that we have to consider a particular line of criticism. Many writers would admit that the Nicene statement is organically continuous with ideas already present in the New Testament, and would acknowledge that they must search there for the beginnings of the Hellenization which in their view characterizes Catholic doctrine. In days when the books of the New Testament were placed at a considerable distance from the date of our Lord's Life, this was easier than it is now, as there was a considerable time given in which the process of Hellenization could take place. But we are still in presence of a theory of this sort, and the points to which I propose to refer briefly in regard to it are the two following. By means of analysis of the Gospels it is attempted to disentangle the nucleus of historic fact which underlies them: this is called the search for the 'Jesus of History'. The influence of Greek philosophy and mystery-religions is then sought to be traced in the writings of St. Paul and St. John: such terms as the λόγος, and the language used in 1 Cor. about the Eucharist being assigned to these sources. To discuss these positions with any degree of adequacy would require a long and technical treatise, and this is not the occasion for attempting anything of this sort. All I can do now is to lay before you what are the general results of my own study of these matters, which has been in process for many years.

1. What I have said about Athanasius is *mutatis mutandis* true of the writers in the New Testament. It is undeniable that words and phrases occur in them for which it is easy to find parallels in pagan writers, religious and philosophical. But it is not enough to find words and phrases. In their non-Christian use these words belong to a system of ideas, and I venture

to think that it is impossible to prove the presence of this system of ideas in the Pauline and Johannine writings. The thought in these, however near their phraseology may occasionally appear to Hellenic thought, goes back not to this but to the much less articulate and reasoned thought of the Hebrew Scriptures.

2. I do not quarrel with the attempt to disentangle the 'Jesus of History' from the existing records. But I think we have a right to ask that the figure which results should account for the existence of the Church and the development of its thought and practice. I venture to think that this condition is not fulfilled. There is one fact written large over the New Testament as a whole, which is that the new movement in religion, whatever it was, dated from the presence in the world of Jesus Christ. None of those to whom it fell to spread the movement were in the smallest doubt about this. St. Paul was not a man to accept dictation or to conceal his own part in the movement; but, though he tells us nothing new of the life of the Lord, there is no doubt that his whole mind and will are prostrate in abasement before the Lord. The same is true of the other New Testament writers: there is not the slightest vestige of a suggestion that any of them were acting in any other capacity than as servants of His. It is difficult to see how if Christ were merely a prophet of the Second Coming with an 'interim ethic', if He were merely a preacher of righteousness and charity, with no message of Salvation, if He had succeeded after His death in convincing His followers of immortality, but did not rise from the grave—it is difficult to see how His followers can have held and retained the opinion of Him which they express in their works. For it must be remembered always that the Second Coming did not take place; the preaching of righteousness did not keep sin out of the infant Church; Christian people, as the Thessalonians noted to their great perplexity, died like other men in

spite of the new life. If the followers of Jesus got their positive doctrines about His nature and functions from Greek philosophy and mystery-religions, it is hard to understand why they should have continued to preach these things as part of the message of Christ, when their experience showed them that the course of the Church was going to be very different indeed from what they had grounds for supposing. All that they believed and taught seemed to them to date back to their knowledge of Him: they were witnesses of what He was and did.

Of course, it is difficult for evolutionary minds to understand how such tremendous changes can have come about through the activities of one Teacher: we naturally try to bridge over the change by imagining a series of almost imperceptible steps. But it seems to me that it is a mistake to suppose that evolution excludes catastrophic changes in history, especially in the spiritual history of man. Look, for instance, at the forty volumes or so of J. S. Bach's music. You can study these, and go back behind them to various predecessors, and see how in various ways characteristics of Bach were anticipated. But there is no unbroken passage from the predecessors to Bach. If you had mastered all that Heinrich Schütz, and Pachelbel, and Buxtehude could teach you, you would still be in the presence of a great fixed gulf, which Bach alone could cross. It is the same with the *Divina Commedia* of Dante. More than almost any other poem that work is the happy hunting-ground of scholars, busily tracing its 'origins' in the history and philosophy and poetry of the day. But the *Summa* of St. Thomas, and the *Speculum* of Vincentius of Beauvais, and all the early Italian poets put together will not give you the *Divina Commedia*: that is a different *thing* altogether. In like manner, I venture to think, you may study the Apocalypses and the mystery-religions and the current philosophy, and show, pro-

bably quite truly, how various elements in the doctrine of the New Testament fit on to elements in pre-Christian and non-Christian thought ; but this will not explain the figure of Christ—the impression He made upon His followers. What is called the ‘Jesus of History’ will not, I think, displace the Jesus of the New Testament, of the New Testament as a whole and not merely of the Gospels.

You will think, I am afraid, that I have forgotten our purpose here to-day, and the Anglo-Catholic Congress. What I have just said brings me back to it directly. I have ventured to suggest that the so-called ‘Jesus of History’, when opposed to the Jesus of the New Testament, is a fictitious figure—or perhaps, I should rather say, a theoretical expedient devised for the solution of a problem. And I think it fails, not because there is no problem, but because it never is solid and stable enough to bear the super-structure which, *ex hypothesi*, depends upon it. So far as we have gone, in other words, it has proved impossible to get behind the Jesus of the New Testament to anything adequate to account for the actual presentation of our Lord in those writings. I now want to go a step further, and suggest that you must be very careful in any efforts you may make towards distinguishing the Jesus of the New Testament from the Jesus of the Church. It is here, I think, that the Anglo-Catholic movement has a great part to play.

In spite of various authorship the books of the New Testament have a wonderful unity in idea. It is easy to distinguish the thought of St. Paul and that of St. John, but it is also inevitable that their agreements should emerge, under study, in a very striking fashion. Moreover, the books comprised in the New Testament have been for many centuries sharply distinguished from all others: a list or Canon was developed, and the books included in it were set in connexion with the Old Testament Scriptures. And it can hardly be denied that



there is a difference between them and all other Christian literature. This difference, which all Christians admit, has been variously defined, and we are not concerned with these definitions now. But it is important to notice that the difference raises a very serious question. Assuming that it is possible to derive from the canonical books a coherent conception of Christ and His work, what is the position of the Church after the close of the Canon? Is Christianity, like Judaism, after all, a religion of a book—in spite of St. Paul's antitheses between that which is written (τὸ γράμμα) and the Spirit? Or is the Spirit who guided the writing and selection of these books alive still in the Church, interpreting the book and guiding the Church to applications of the written word to new ages and circumstances and men? Unfortunately, this is not a plain question, but still more unfortunately, it is widely supposed that a plain answer can be given to it. It is widely held that there is an exhaustive alternative between the Bible and the Church: one or other may be—many would say must be—taken as the complete and final and infallible guide. It seems to me that both sides of this disjunction are inadequate to the facts: both alike aim at severing and treating in severance two parts of one single living whole. This is a mistake somewhat resembling that upon which I have already made some comment—the severance between the 'Jesus of History' and the Jesus of the Church. It is true that there is, at any rate almost all Christians think so, a coherent conception of Christ and His work in Scripture, but it is not justifiable to set this in antagonism to the body through which the Scriptures themselves were selected and gathered together, as if it were an alien body with no continuity of mind and no unity of inspiration with the Scriptures. As I understand the matter, it is this principle of continuity in idea and inspiration which the Anglo-Catholic party has inherited through Tractarianism from the ancient Church, and for

which it stands to-day. Anglo-Catholics maintain, as truly as St. Peter, that there is none other name under heaven, except that of Jesus Christ, whereby men may be saved. But they wish also to retain and to emphasize in various ways their retention of the consciousness of union with the whole spiritual Body of Christ throughout its history from the days of the Son of Man until now.

But at this point a new question arises, upon which I will venture to say a few words in conclusion. I have compared the attempt to disentangle the 'Jesus of History' to the attempt to sever the Jesus of the New Testament from the Jesus of the Church. That these last are closely connected I have no doubt. But there is an important difference between the two cases. If I am right in thinking that the various conjectural pictures of the 'Jesus of History' fail to achieve their purpose, we are left with the character set forth in the New Testament and with that alone. But if we are also right in condemning the undue severance of the Bible and the Church, are we bound to all that has been asserted in the name of the Church as regards our Lord, and all the inferences that have been based upon His life and work? I think not. The history of the Church covers many centuries, and it has been chequered by controversy, discussion, and schism. Doubtless there has been continuous development, but there have also been heresies and accretions which have no true place in the line. Every one who has studied Church history knows the complexity of the problems raised in it. Might we, perhaps, put our question in a rather different form? Is there any limit to the range of authority? Are there any propositions, short of self-contradiction, which no authority can make credible? I think there are such propositions, and they are of two kinds. One kind belongs to the region of history, the other to that of metaphysic. I can make my meaning most clear by

taking instances, and for these I will go back to the Nicene Creed from which I began. This Creed asserts that our Lord Jesus Christ was Incarnate of the Holy Ghost and the Virgin Mary, and that He ascended into heaven. Any one may say that these two statements are *a priori* impossible, and that the historical evidence is against them. The Church maintains that they are not impossible, and that the assertion of them rests upon adequate historical evidence, and that they are part of its continuous witness. Some centuries later it was asserted that the Blessed Virgin was immaculately conceived, and was received into heaven by an Assumption. There may be *a priori* reasons for believing these things, but they do not prove the facts: there is no historical evidence worth serious consideration. I would venture to assert, therefore, that no authority, however venerable, could make these assertions as to the Blessed Virgin Mary rationally credible. In the Nicene Creed it is asserted that the Son is of one substance with the Father. I have tried to show that no *theory* of substance is here involved; and I should further maintain that no authority is adequate to define and impose a theory of substance, either in regard to the Incarnation or in regard to the Eucharist, and that, therefore, all theoretical expositions or practices in regard to the Eucharist which depend upon a theory of substance have no validity, however venerable the authority which promulgates them.

The history of the Church is chequered: it has amply fulfilled the forebodings of St. Paul, and for this reason, while we claim our place in the succession of Christian thought, we cannot bind ourselves blindly to everything which has been held by venerable authority. The New Testament claims a unique authority, because without it we have no means whatever of knowing anything about the founder of our religion: all our knowledge and the primary content of the witness of the Church is there. Nothing else stands quite in this position.

In the subsequent period the development of heresy, of controversy, and schism places us in a different position. We have to work out for our own times, and in the light of the history of the Church the real meaning for to-day of the original witness. It is here, I think, that the Anglo-Catholic requires the help of the Modernist. He wants to be able to go freely to the history of the Church, and to study freely the development of its doctrine and practice. The Church of England has many difficulties, but it has some peculiar advantages. Owing to its special history it can approach questions of doctrine and practice without being crushed by the weight of a tradition, such as that of the Eastern Church, which has not for very many centuries had to face the blast of new thought and criticism; it is free, also, without for a moment denying or attenuating the truth of the Christian religion, to adopt a more liberal conception of the nature of truth and the method of approaching it than is compatible with the Roman claims. So far from disparaging the Nicene Creed, I think we want to study more carefully its method and principles, and to remember that many years passed after its formulation before its authority was recognized by the whole Church. I think the Fathers of Nicaea were wiser and more subtle than many of their critics; they reasserted, but they did not venture to add to, the contents of the witness of the Church; they protected the deposit of the Faith by adopting one extra-scriptural word, but they made no attempt to tie up the Church to any system of metaphysical thought.



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